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ABSTRACT

Preliminary results of a comparison of the language modifications made by teachers when telling stories to native English speakers and non-native speakers of English at various proficiency levels suggest that teachers need to do more than make the routine modifications in linguistic input to lower-level learners. Teachers need to: (1) act on the feedback offered by the learners concerning how much of what they are being told is comprehensible, and (2) use caution in making assumptions about the learners' knowledge of the world, not taking for granted that non-native speakers are less knowledgeable than native speakers but first finding out how much they do know. (MSE)

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MODIFICATIONS TO FOREIGN LISTENERS: THE STORIES TEACHERS TELL

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper I discuss some preliminary findings of research that I am working on at the moment [1]. My area of interest is the effects on comprehensibility of the modifications that native speakers (NSs) make when talking to non-native speakers (NNSs). Research over the last 15 years or so has pointed to two main types of modification made by NSs to NNSs. The early research investigated adjustments of input, associated with the notion of Foreigner Talk, the term coined by Ferguson (1975). Attention then shifted to the modification of interaction, that is, to the way that NSs structure conversation with NNSs. To mark this change of focus from input to interaction Evelyn Hatch introduced the term Foreigner Talk Discourse (Hatch 1978), and more recently the term native/non-native discourse has come into use (e.g. Gaies 1982, Long 1983).

An initial analysis of my data points to a third form of modification, which does not seem to have been reported in other native/non-native studies. I think it may have important implications for the way that we as teachers interact with non-native learners. What my data suggest is that EFL teachers select different types of information when talking to non-native hearers.

1.1 BACKGROUND

I videotaped 24 EFL teachers telling stories to a series of four listeners, in turn. The listeners were, in order of recording, a NS and three NNSs, at advanced, intermediate and elementary levels of English proficiency. For each recording, the two people sat face to face, but with a screen between them, preventing them from seeing each other's papers. The speaker narrated three stories, each based on a sequence of six pictures. The listener had the same series of pictures, but in jumbled order, and their task was to number the pictures to match the story told by the narrator [2].

The listeners were encouraged to interrupt at any stage and ask questions if they had difficulty following the story. The aim of the study was to compare the way each speaker talked to the four listeners, and also to make a comparison across speakers, to see if the teachers would make similar sorts of adjustments, or whether there might be idiosyncratic styles in NS-NNS interaction.

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In the next two sections I give a brief illustration of modifications of input (section 2) and interaction (section 3) from my data, and in section 4 discuss the third type of adjustment, involving information choice.

2. MODIFICATIONS OF INPUT

In terms of the input modifications, the narrators produced the sort of adjustments reported in the research literature. These include aspects of lexis, syntax and phonology (cf. Henzl 1979). I will present two examples of lexical simplification. The first is the replacement of low-frequency vocabulary by more common items, when speaking to low-proficiency learners.

Table 1 below shows 24 speakers' first-mention use of nouns to refer to a barge in one story. The low-frequency item BARGE and the higher-frequency term BOAT can be seen to display very different patterns of use among the recordings, depending on the listener's assumed proficiency.

Insert Table 1 here

The distribution of the two terms is to some extent complementary: roughly equally used with the advanced NNS listeners; BARGE predominant with the NSs; and BOAT with the lower-level NNSs (L1 and Le).

Speakers also produced clear lexical modification of a second type - the avoidance of idiomatic expressions with lower-level NNSs. In the extracts below, speakers 22 and 23 modify their use of idioms (TO COTTON ON, THE PENNY DROPPED and IT DAWNED ON HIM) when describing one particular element in the same story to their intermediate and elementary listeners.

Extracts 1: speaker 22

to Ln "having cottoned on to their joke"
to La "the man then saw the funny side of the story"
to Li "the man then thought this was very funny"
to Le "then the man decided it was a big joke + he started laughing

Extracts 2: speaker 23

to Ln "and so finally the penny dropped"
to La "and then it dawned on him"
to Li "and then he realised"
to Le "and then + he thought + and he realised (2 secs) it was easy

3 MODIFICATIONS OF INTERACTION

The second major area of modification that I referred to earlier was the way the NS structures the interaction, in order to make the exchange more comprehensible and to allow the non-native partner to participate in the talk. In his 1983 survey article, Long proposes a list of 15 discourse procedures that are found more commonly in NS/NNS interaction than in Ns/NNS conversation; among them are comprehension checks and pauses. The overall figures for these two types of interaction modification are shown in Table 2 below:

Insert Table 2 here

As might be expected, on average the narrators in the study paused most frequently when talking to their elementary listener, and least frequently with their native partner; a similar pattern emerges in the case of the frequency of their use of comprehension checks.

I might add, in passing, a possible reason for the fact that the overall duration of the total 3-story interaction was shorter with the advanced NNS listener than with the native. This is surprising at first sight. I think it is likely that this was simply due to a practice effect; since the narrators told their stories in the order Ln → La → Li → Le, the Ln storytelling was in effect a dry run for the three NNS narrations, as it involved a degree of familiarization with the picture sequence itself and also the process of telling the story [3].

4 MODIFICATIONS OF INFORMATION CHOICE

I will now concentrate on the third sort of modification. As I mentioned earlier, it concerns the speakers' selection of information. Most of the teachers that I recorded show clear differences across their versions of the same story to different listeners, in terms of decisions as to which information to refer to. Although the speakers had the same pictures in all four cases, they seem to have geared their selection of information to the level of listener in three ways:

(1) the level of descriptive detail
(2) the explicitness of logical development
(3) the filling in of assumed socio-cultural gaps

4.1 Level of descriptive detail

The speakers use an increasing amount of detail when establishing the identity of characters in the stories. For example, in story 1 a blind man makes an appearance in the second of the six pictures. Table 3 represents the details mentioned by two of my subjects to their four listeners.

Insert Table 3 here

The overall quantitative pattern is similar for the two speakers. Each of them mentions more details, more often to their elementary listener than to the others. Also, some information is given only to their Le partner. In speaker 12's case, it is the fact that the blind man is old; speaker 24 points out that he has a sign (saying "Blind") hanging round his neck. Neither piece of information is offered to any listener other than the lowest-level NNS.

In this particular picture series the blind man is one of only two male characters, the other being a small boy; so there was no possible source of confusion for the listener. Yet speakers 12 and 24 (and in fact all but one of the other subjects in the study) felt it necessary to supply more detail to their lower-level partners. The pattern of these two narrators is representative of the sort of increase in detail that I found across the four tasks done by any one teacher. I will come back to this point later.

4.2 Explicitness of narrative development

The second differential information-choice characteristic to come out of the data is the degree of explicitness with which the narrators set out the logical development of the story. In conversation with NSs we interact by making leaps or jumps, rather than by proceeding step by step.

This can be illustrated by an example from a conversation I overheard on a train that was just drawing into a station. It was just before New Year and two elderly women in fur coats were getting ready to get off. One of them looked out through the window and recognised someone on the platform. What followed went like this:

A: Ah, I can see David. Alone.
B: Oh ?
A: Much better.
B: Hm

It seemed to me at the time, from the tone of voice and facial expressions that the underlying meaning of the exchange was this:

A: Ah, I can see David but (X) isn't with him.
B: Oh ? I wonder why he/she hasn't come along too.
A: Well, actually I think it's much better that he/she isn't with him because we'll be able to talk more freely about (etc.)
B: Yes, I think you're right.

Now, the women were able to communicate satisfactorily without having to make the links explicit. It is normal for us to make conversational progress by skips and jumps and not by treading every inch of the route. We rely on our discourse partner to recover information implicit in what we tell them. When we make a false assumption about what they know, or what we think they know, they will indicate that by asking for clarification.

So, we can take it that if B had not understood what A was hinting at, there would have been an exchange such as this:

A: Ah, I can see David. Alone.
B: So ?

followed by some sort of explanation from A.

But what happens in the recordings where the teachers are addressing lower-level NNS listeners is very different from our "normal" mode of conversation, despite the fact that the partners can rely on shared visual information.

Below, you will see extracts from versions of one story told by speakers 8 and 10. Notice how they make the reasons underlying the behaviour of the blind man more and more explicit as their listeners' likely level of comprehension decreases:

Extracts 3: speaker 8

to Ln "the blind man (...) he's obviously rattling his tin to try and beg from passers-by"

to La "it's a blind man + sh-- shaking a + tin + to try and beg for money from passers-by

to Li "an old man + shaking a tin + this tin is to collect money + from the people in the street + because this man is blind + he can't see anything + and he hasn't a job + he needs somebody to give him money so that he can live"

to Le "the blind man has a tin and he's rattling the tin + in order to attract people's attention because he wants them to give him some money + because he's blind and he's poor he can't work"

Extracts 4: speaker 10

to Ln *"a blind man (...) with (...) his little begging tin*

to La *"an old man who was blind standing there with (...) a little collecting tin + he was begging for money*

to Li *"a blind old man with (...) a tin + which he was shaking + he was begging people to help him + to give him money"*

to Le *"a poor blind old man + standing there with (...) his begging tin + the blind old man + was + asking people to give him money + because he was + he couldn't work + he needed that money to live"*

What was taken for granted in the first version of the story is foregrounded in the NNS versions, particularly in those told to the intermediate and elementary hearers. Notice, by the way, that speaker 8 uses the word "obviously" only in the NS narrative. Table 4 shows the underlying logical links in this segment of the narrative:

Insert Table 4 here

When we compare the amount of detail offered to the lower-level listeners, we can see some evidence for what we might call an overkill strategy. Even when the actual quantity of logical linking is similar across the versions to different listeners, there may well be a qualitative difference. For example, take the case of these extracts from a story about using Archimedes' principle to weigh an elephant in a barge:

Insert Table 5 here

In explaining the solution to the problem of weighing the elephant, this speaker uses more or less the same amount of detail, but it is only the elementary level listener who is told the inference to be drawn from the fact that the painted mark has been reached (underlined in Table 5). It seems that the speaker was prepared to assume that the other partners would be able to recover that information for themselves.

4.3 **Filling in assumed socio-cultural gaps**

I find this area particularly interesting because it may well give us some insight into the socio-cultural image that teachers have of their language learners. The particular instances that came out of my data relate to the function of two gestures depicted in one of the stories: head scratching and fist shaking.

It seems to me that these particular gestures are likely to be international, rather than culturally bound [4]. It is rather intriguing that a number of the teachers in my recordings seem to have assumed that they had to plug a cultural gap by interpreting the gestures for their intermediate and elementary listeners.

Let's take head scratching. Ten of the teachers in my data seem to have assumed that their elementary listeners would not be able to understand why it is that the man in the story was scratching his head. We might take speaker 5 as an example:

Extracts 5: speaker 5

to Ln "this was rather puzzling + so he takes off his hat and scratches his head

to La "and he takes off his hat and scratches his head + in confusion"

to Li "well the man doesn't know what to do + he's very puzzled + and so he scratches his head which means I don't know what to do"

to Le "the old man is + very puzzled and worried about + how to get his hats + from the monkeys /1.5 secs/ and he takes off his hat and scratches his head + as people often do + when they feel puzzled"

There were similar explanatory episodes for an incident in the same story where the man shakes his fist at the monkeys, which have taken his hats. Again, the meaning of the fist gesture was made explicit only for the lower-level NNSs, in particular for the elementary listeners.

So, summarising this third type of NS/NNS adjustment, the speakers tend to modify their decisions about what narrative information to employ in telling a story, according to their perceptions of how their listeners are likely to cope. They describe characters and objects in more detail, they explain cause and motivation links more explicitly and they interpret for their intermediate and elementary listeners what they allow the higher-proficiency partners to infer themselves.

5 IMPLICATIONS

What does this set of modifications show ? One way of looking at it would be to say that the narrators found themselves in the position of having to make a compromise between two of Grice's conversational maxims (Grice 1975). The Quantity Maxim says *"Make your contribution as informative as is required"*; the Manner Maxim tells us *"Be brief"*. It may be that one of the features of NS/NNS interaction is that the NS partner finds it necessary to err of the side of quantity, in order to get the message across to the NNS hearer.

But I have a nagging doubt, which comes from adopting the perspective of the language learner, rather than the native speaker. My experience as a non-native learner in various countries is that it is not uncommon to find NSs who talk to you as if you are on a different plane from them, not only linguistically but also intellectually.

Harder has discussed what he calls "the reduced personality of the second language learner" (Harder 1980). Among other things, he says that "in order to be a wit in a foreign language you have to go through the stage of being a half-wit - there is no other way". He is primarily concerned with the language learner's role as a producer of interlanguage, but I think there may also be lessons in my data for us as teachers, in terms of the receptive role of the learner. Certainly, many of the teachers in my recordings - probably for the best of motives - go beyond input and interaction modification in structuring their stories for their non-native listeners.

It could be argued that what these teachers are doing is making an admirable effort to narrate a story as clearly as possible to the listeners with lower levels of competence in English. So does it really matter if they go to these lengths to get the message across ?

My response would be that to look at it solely in terms of what the NS does is to take a one-sided view of communication. Even in these relatively one-way storytelling tasks, the listeners were in a position to influence the interaction; in fact, they were encouraged to do so in the initial instructions from the narrator. They provided feedback on how comprehensible the talk from the teacher was. In that sense the listeners were, potentially, active participants in the discourse that led to the completion of the task.

But one of the striking things is that some narrators continue to pile on information, despite the attempts of their non-native partners to make it clear that they have understood the current segment of the story and that the narrative can proceed. Here is one typical example:

Extract 6: speaker 22 (to Le):

S: and on the other side of the road + from the shop + there was a blind man + a man with + dark glasses + holding
L: a man who + sorry ?
S: yes ?
L: a man
S: a blind man
L: a blind man yes I see
S: a blind man yes he has a stick in his hand + and uh + dark glasses
L: hmhm ok
S: and he was holding + a + a can can in his hand + to collect money
L: yeah yeah + I see
S: yeah ? / 1 sec./ so the little boy noticed him...

In his third turn in the extract, the listener says "a blind man yes I see", which might reasonably be taken as proof that (he believes) that (a) he knows the meaning of the word BLIND and (b) he has identified which character the speaker is referring to - i.e. the only man in the pictures. But the speaker offers more information: firstly, that the man is carrying a stick and , secondly, that he is wearing dark glasses. Again, the listener signals he has understood with "hmhm ok". Still the narrator perseveres with further descriptive detail: he refers to the can in the man's hand and even to its intended function. "Yeah yeah + I see" is the student's third attempt to show he believes he has understood. Even then, the speaker checks that is the case ("yeah?") before proceeding with the story.

A second example shows how an elementary NNS listener has obviously understood the punchline of the story and signals that by laughing at the appropriate point. But, again, the speaker doggedly completes the story:

Extract 7: speaker 18 (to Le):

S: and he thinks it's the driver of the car
L: hm
S: who's put the money in his tin
L: (LAUGHS)
S: and so he lifts his hat
L: yes
S: to the departing figure + of the driver + and the little boy is is standing there with no thanks
L: (LAUGHS)
S: for his good deed
L: hm
S: all right good

This speaker is particularly interesting, because she reacts very differently to a similar signal from her advanced non-native listener, at the end of another story:

Extract 8: speaker 18 (to La)

S: so he's got a problem + and + wondering + what to do about this he scratches his head + and of course the monkeys all scratch their heads as well /2 secs/ and they're obviously + going to + do exactly what he does
L: (NONVERBAL SIGNAL)
S: got it ?
L: yeah
S: right

In this second case, the speaker accepts the advanced listener's claim to have understood the ending of the story, despite the fact that the narrative is in fact still at the fifth of the six pictures, not at the final one. This would suggest that the narrator allots rather different roles to learners at advanced and elementary levels. She is prepared to take the advanced listener at his word, as far as comprehension is concerned.

But there are, as one might expect, EFL teachers who seem to show greater sensitivity for the learner's perspective. The pattern of interaction shown by speakers 22 and 26 with their elementary listener is very different from that of another teacher, speaker 4. At the end of one story, he not only responds to the comprehension signals that the elementary listener gives him, but even allows him to take over the completion of the story

Extract 9: speaker 4 (to Le)

S: he thinks that the blind + he thinks that + the woman + gave him the money
L: oh yeah yeah
S: so he takes his hat off
L: oh
S: because he's grateful
L: ah
S: and the little boy is um + very
L: um uh wrong + wrongly
S: he's a bit disappointed
L: bit bit
S: yes + he's unhappy he's um sad
L: yes
S: because
L: because um + uh + blind man + um he gave uh uh the ch-- the child gave the money
S: hm
L: to to uh blind man
S: yes
L: but blind man uh hat
S: yeah

L: against + against woman
S: that's right + yeah

Notice that the learner's productive ability is extremely limited in terms of formal accuracy, but the teacher allows him the time and space to round off the story.

6 CONCLUSION

What I would like to suggest is that, taking a more global view, we need to be as sensitive as speaker 4 seems to be to the learners' perspective. As well as the modifications that we routinely make as teachers in the linguistic input to lower-level learners , we need to do two other things. The first is to act on the feedback they offer us , as to how little or how much of what we are telling them is comprehensible. The second is to be cautious in our assumptions about their knowledge of the world, the information they have at their disposal inside their heads.

We should bear in mind that the process of comprehension involves not simply understanding what you hear, but more importantly *fitting what you hear into what you know.* Rather than taking it for granted - as some of the teachers in my study seem to do - that non-native learners know less than native speakers, I suggest that we should be prepared to find out first just how much they do know.

NOTES

1 This paper is a revised version of one presented at the 20th Conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) in Brighton, England in April 1986.

2 The picture stories on which my research is based come from Composition through Pictures by J.B. Heaton (London: Longman 1966). I would like to thank author and publisher for their permission to use their copyright material in my research. Summaries of the three stories are given in the Appendix that follows these notes.

3 It could be argued that the speakers would naturally tend to embroider their stories and that each successive version would therefore contain more detail, irrespective of the proficiency level of the listener. However, there is some evidence against this line of argument. In two of the experimental recordings, the advanced learner failed to arrive at the time arranged and had to be recorded last, resulting in a recording order of Ln → Li → Le → La. Nevertheless, the pattern of adjustment adopted by the speakers in these two cases followed that found in the 'normal' recordings, that is, they made more modifications to the elementary student than to the advanced , despite the fact that the latter was the final listener. This accidental evidence suggests that there is no major practice effect at work across each series of narrations.

4 This assumption seemed to be borne out by the teachers attending my IATEFL presentation. Although they represented a reasonably broad cross-section of cultures, they were unanimous in interpreting fist-shaking as a sign of anger, and head-scratching as one of puzzlement.

APPENDIX

Story 1 begins with a small boy looking into a toyshop window, deciding what to buy with his pocket money. On the other side of the street, he notices a blind beggar and suffers pangs of conscience and decides to give his pocket money to the man, rather than spend it on himself. As the boy approaches the blind man, a woman gets out of her car and slams the door. The man hears the noise just as the boy drops his coins into his collecting tin, so he assumes that the car driver was the donor and takes off his hat in a gesture of gratitude towards where the noise came from. The boy is disappointed that his good deed has gone unrecognised.

Story 2 involves a hat seller sitting under a tree full of monkeys. As he falls asleep, the monkeys come down, take his hats and climb back up the tree. The man wakes up, sees them wearing his hats, gets angry and shakes his fist at them. They copy him and shake their fists back. The man scratches his head in puzzlement. The monkeys do the same. This gives him an idea: he takes off his hat, drops it to the ground and the monkeys again copy him. So he gets his hats back.

Story 3 is set in a port. A group of officials are baffled by the prospect of having to weigh an elephant that is too large for the only available scales. A small boy tells themto put the animal onto a nearby barge. He paints a mark to show the water level with the elephant on board. They then take the elephant out and fill the barge with stones until it sinks back down to the mark, when the weight of the elephant and the stones must be the same. They are then able to use the scales to weigh the stones in baskets and so to calculate the weight of the elephant.

TABLES

Table 1

Lexical simplification: replacement of low-frequency vocabulary items

Listener	BARGE	BOAT	SHIP	VEHICLE	total
Ln	16	7	-	1	24
La	12	11	1	-	24
Li	6	16	2	-	24
Le	3	19	2	-	24

Key to listener levels: Ln = native
La = advanced non-native
Li = intermediate non-native
Le = elementary non-native

Table 2

Modification of interaction
(averages over all speakers' narratives)

Listener	Duration (total)	Frequency of pauses (every n secs)	Frequency of checks (every n secs)
Ln	8'41"	19.9	90.1
La	8'17"	14.9	49.9
Li	9'45"	13.8	39.7
Le	11'24"	9.9	37.9

Table 3

Level of descriptive detail
(Story 1)

	Speaker 12				Speaker 27			
	Ln	La	Li	Le	Ln	La	Li	Le
across street		X		X	X	X	X	X
old				XX				
blind	X	X	X	XXX	X	XX	XX	XXX
beggar	X	X	X	XXX				
hat		X	X	X				
tin/cup			X	X	X		X	X
sign		X	X	X				X
stick			X	X			X	X
glasses			X		X		X	XXX
Total:	2	5	7	13	4	3	6	11

Note: each X = one mention by speaker

Table 4

Underlying links for the blind man's actions
(Story 1)

	Speaker 8				Speaker 10			
	Ln	La	Li	Le	Ln	La	Li	Le
the old man is blind	X	X	X	XX	X	X	X	X
he can't see anything			X					
he can't work			X	X				X
he can't earn a living			X					X
he's poor				X				X
he has to get money somehow			X					
he has to resort to begging						X	X	
he begs from passers-by	X	X	X					X
he carries a collecting tin			X	X	X	X	X	X
he has to attract attention				X				
he rattles/shakes the tin	X	X		X			X	
Total	3	3	7	7	2	3	4	6

Table 5

Underlying links for the loading of coal/stones

(Speaker 19)

link	Ln	La	Li	Le
put coal in	X	X	X	X
boat sinks	X		X	
to correct level	X	X	X	
to painted mark		X		X
when elephant was in	X		X	
so weights are same				X
stop loading				X
take out coal		X		
put into buckets		X	X	X
weigh each bucket	X	X	X	X
find elephant's weight	X	X	X	X
Total number of links:	6	7	7	7

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